

THE WEATHER DID IT

(The Clipper wrote the following article for the May 23, 1948, issue of the Boston Sunday Post.)

A snow flurry changed the course of New England history. It made a historic shrine out of a hunk of rock, and interwove the destinies of the Pilgrims and Plymouth. It changed the complexion of our national history.

If it hadn't snowed during a certain half-hour on the afternoon of a certain December day, the beginnings of the Old Colony, of the Bay State, of New England, and of the United States, might have been on Cape Cod. Get one of the natives of Barnstable talking about this some time. He'll tell you, and he will be 100 per cent correct, that a bit of snow deflected the course of American history.

Some day an enterprising historian will write a book explaining how weather has changed the normal course of events. He will state categorically that weather made Madrid the capital of Spain and that weather prevented sleepy, old, charming Barnstable from being the bedrock of Pilgrim culture and tradition.

CHANGED COURSE

Take Madrid first. Emperor Charles V, King of Spain and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had a gouty foot and he discovered that the climate of Madrid relieved his suffering. Thus he established that city as the capital of Spain, although it would not normally have been the logical choice. Nor would Plymouth have normally been the ideal site for the first settlement. Barnstable probably would have been better. But it snowed.

Most historians skim over such speculative matters, but a distinguished scholar named Albert Perry Brigham, a doctor of science and a professor of geology in Colgate University a quarter of a century ago, discussed this point in a book he wrote on Cape Cod and the Old Colony.

"Whether accidents can happen in great events that shape destiny perhaps, we cannot know," he said. "What stirs us to this observation is the record of a blinding snowstorm that was falling around the Mayflower explorers as they passed the opening into Barnstable Harbor. Here between Sandy Neck Light and the present Yarmouth Port is a wide gateway inviting a mariner with small craft to quiet and well-protected waters behind miles of barrier beach, and leading up to where green meadows, laden orchards and gracious homes now mark the ancient settlements of Barnstable."

PLYMOUTH GETS HONOR

He then went on to say that this snowstorm interfered with the plans of the landing party. Whereupon the weary Pilgrim mariners in a numbing storm that still beat down as dusk approached, headed into the channel between the outer end of Plymouth Beach and Saquish Head.

In 1620 Saquish was a glacial, hilly island, not yet connected by a sandy ribbon to the hill of the Gurnet lights and Duxbury Beach. But Plymouth Beach was then, as now, a sandy strand.

The Pilgrims sailed past Saquish and landed on Clark's Island. But who ever gives this shamefully neglected island a tumble today? And who ever has much to say about Thievish Harbor, where the Pilgrims first went ashore? Well, some folks do, but poor Barnstable is handed all the crumbs while Plymouth gets all the berries.

So does Plymouth Rock, which nobody especially noticed until the year 1769. Soon thereafter it became celebrated, while another rock was being neglected. We refer to Pulpit Rock on Clark's Island, where the Pilgrims knelt in their first thanksgiving to God for safe delivery.

When I first visited Clark's Island several years ago we knew the significance neither of the rock nor of the island itself. There was no steel grille or uniformed guards appealing the history of Pulpit Rock. We also discovered that many residents of Plymouth and surrounding towns like Kingston, Duxbury and Marshfield knew very little about Pulpit Rock or Clark's Island.

NAMED FOR MATE

Clark's Island has finally come into its own with reputable historians. It was named for the chief mate of the Mayflower. Like Saquish and the Gurnet, familiar landmarks to all who sail around Plymouth or Duxbury Bay, Clark's Island is a glacial hill. That is it was formed from the debris carried along by a glacier. It is roughly three-quarters of a mile long, has low cliffs that are cut by the tidewater.

It's worth a trip to see the tablet marking the first landing of Mayflower men on the western side of Cape Cod Bay. That tablet, Pulpit Rock, records their day of rest and worship on Sunday. The Forefathers (they were not even called Pilgrims until 1840) didn't land on Plymouth until Monday morning.

It is further worthy of note that Clark's Island was later reconsidered as the best place for the initial settlement. Many of the Mayflower passengers wanted to settle along the Jones River in the present village of Kingston, another hamlet that has rarely received the historic attention it deserves. Other Mayflowerians said nay. There were too many trees to be cleared, they would be more exposed to attack by the Indians and a few other things, including the fact that the fishing was better elsewhere.

At this point Governor Bradford's eminent ancestor by that name spoke out firmly and suggested they dig in on Clark's Island. He argued eloquently that they would there have more protection from hostile Indians.

And for a brief moment it looked as though Clark's Island would get the nod. But an examining party found it unsuitable. It has security, but there were other things to consider.

Plymouth, on the other hand, had a good harbor with protected waters. It had plenty of fish and shellfish.

Here there was excellent clam digging, cod fishing, eel catching. Here was a stretch of land that had already been cleared by the Indians. Near by was a brook to furnish fresh water. That is the Town Brook of today, that was later to power a mill. There was wood for fuel, lumber for homes, timber for ships. And so here the Forefathers settled.